

IT Accessibility; Governments and Industry React

Governments around the world are working to improve the accessibility of electronic and information technology (EIT) for people with disabilities. One of the first countries to take legislative action is the United States.

Section 508 of the U.S. Rehabilitation Act requires that EIT used by federal agencies is accessible to those with vision, hearing, or mobility challenges if the EIT is procured after June 21, 2001. To date, legislation applies only



to U.S. federal agencies; however, many companies developing products for the U.S. federal government also provide these same products and services to private clients. Companies investing in EIT compliance are likely to promote that compliance to nonfederal and private-sector clients. It is expected

that EIT accessibility will become the standard. The European Union, Japan, and many U.S. state and local agencies are considering adopting legislation similar to Section 508 for their EIT.

EIT includes software applications and operating systems, computers, Web-based information or applications, telecommunications functions, video or multi-media products, and self-contained, closed products such as information kiosks and transaction machines.

Why Companies Should Care

Aside from the legislative requirement, there are compelling reasons to make EIT more accessible. In the U.S., disability advocates estimate that 10 percent of the population are challenged in some way and are likely to use EIT, such as e-commerce, to accomplish tasks.

How Section 508 Affects EIT Development

It is quite possible that compliance with this legislation will increase the cost of developing EIT; however, the result improves usability for everyone. Compliance should result in more detailed design analyses, additional quality assurance, and improved accessibility testing. It is also likely that the costs and time required for development will decline over time. Market forces will encourage companies, including those that do not sell to the U.S. Federal government, to make their EIT more accessible.

How You Can Meet This Challenge

ICF Consulting believes that most software sold in the United States soon will need to comply with Section 508's guidelines. For this reason, the firm advises taking the following steps to ensure compliance of products developed for clients.

- Begin now to track events and collect information.
- Demonstrate assistive technologies (screen reader magnification devices, Braille readers) to all employees so they can understand how persons with disabilities use them.
- Invite employees to lectures on appropriate software applications such as JavaScript, Cascading Style Sheets, ALT text, and Adobe Acrobat.
- Create an intranet site for sharing information on the subject.
- Work with employees in other parts of the company to account for Section 508's effects on budgets and schedules.
- Discuss accessibility requirements and the effects on budgets and schedules with clients.



Resources

- The final version of Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act, 29 U.S.C. 794d (1998) can be found at www.section508.gov/docs/508law
 - The World Wide Web Consortium's guidelines used as the basis for Section 508's requirements are at www.w3c.org/wais
 - The Access Board is "an independent federal agency devoted to accessibility for people with disabilities."
- Its Web site discusses architectural as well as EIT barriers at www.access-board.gov/news/508-final.htm
- The Federal Information Technology Accessibility Initiative (www.section508.gov) is "a federal government inter-agency effort to offer information and technical assistance to assist in the successful implementation of Section 508."
 - ICF Consulting advises clients on Section 508 compliance as well as the business implications of the U.S. Rehabilitation Act. 